

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 38

Issue 3 *Winter* 2008-2009

Article 44

2008

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Recommended Citation

Blakinger, Kate. "Inside This New Skin." *The Iowa Review* 38.3 (2008): 155-159. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6549>

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KATE BLAKINGER

Inside This New Skin

My grandma's so old she looks like something chewed up and spat out, the dog-gnawed tongue of an old leather boot. Some days she wears false eyelashes that loosen and flap when she blinks. She lives in a dusty RV parked in the woods and everything in that motor home is really something else altogether. If you give the bathroom sink a yank, it pivots, and tucked behind it you'll find a tiny washer and dryer, just large enough to get a week's worth of undies clean. The kitchen table folds into the wall and out springs the bed I sleep on, complete with sheets and a squashed round pillow.

I hiked through the woods for miles to reach this little hideaway. "Come closer," my grandma said to me when I showed up on her doorstep. "I can't see too well; you have to get closer. Closer and closer until I say stop." And she didn't say stop until my cold nose bumped her shriveled one and I could taste her breath in my mouth. It tasted just like a mildewy basement would if you were stupid enough to lick the floor. "Erika! You're too pretty," my grandma said then. "Let me give you some of my ugliness to protect you from all the handsome princes out there." She plucked some warts off her knuckles and threw them at me. I swear it's true.

In the whole RV there isn't a single mirror. In the shiny tin of the teakettle and the glass of the windows, I'm just a smudge of white skin and black hair. But I can feel the warts, little hard pellets just under the skin, scattered across my cheeks.

My grandma might be a witch. Or maybe a witch came and killed her, jumped right into her skin, and is wearing it like it's her own. A witch can do that, you know.

I ask her questions as a test.

"What was my cat's middle name?"

One of her eyebrows flies up, deepening the furrows on her forehead. "Last I heard, you didn't have a cat, you had a dog."

"And?"

"And if it had a middle name, I don't know it. But you called it Casper."

"What recurring dream did my father have as a child?" I figure this one is a stumper for sure.

"Why are you asking these things, Erika?"

"Don't you know the answer?"

Grandma sighs. "He dreamed that his arms grew faster than the rest of him and got all tangled up and knotted together."

I tell her I have that dream too. He passed it on to me, along with my black hair and my terrible laugh. My poor father. He married a spiteful woman, so I've run away.

My grandma teaches me about the woods. I learn to tell the black-capped chickadee from the golden-winged warbler. She shows me which mushrooms to pick for eating and which to pick for my enemies. And she drills it into my head that I must always stay on the paths, especially when it snows. In a blizzard there are no horizons, just whiteness in every direction. It's impossible not to lose your way, if you even knew it before the snow began to fall. In a blizzard, she says, the devil sometimes shows himself to lost travelers. He looks as human as you or I but the devil never shivers. If you meet him, don't take a sip from the flask he offers; don't set yourself down by his fire. The liquid that burns down your throat will freeze you from the inside out and the fire that seems to warm your toes is just the trick of a two-bit conjurer, the glow of it hiding the bluish tinge of your dying skin.

At first, I loved to slide across the frozen pond or scoot up the skinny pines to survey the forest, never minding the bark that licked the skin off my knees or the cold that brought the blood to my cheeks. But the thrill wears off. It's boring in the woods with just an old woman for company. I steal cigarettes from Grandma's pack of menthols and go for long walks. Her cigarettes taste like mint gum mixed with burnt fur. I miss Casper and my father. I think about a blue-haired boy I used to know.

One day while I'm walking, the feathers of falling snow start to thicken around me until the forest is shrouded in white, invisible behind a gauzy curtain. My coat is an ugly quilted thing, but it's warm, lined with wool and stuffed with goose down, so I sit on a stump and I wait. I catch a few flakes on my tongue. They taste like nothing.

When the snowfall lets up, the trees are furred in white and the forest is all soft curves. I swish through the powder, plunging my boots in and out of the snow, my breath coming in little puffs. It's not long before I cross paths with a hunter. He is an older man, graying, with a stout belly that strains against his coat. Wet flakes are caught in his brows and beard and broken capillaries run up and down his nose like scribbles from a red pen. "My, aren't you a pretty little thing," he says. I lift a hand to my cheeks, checking: the warts are still there. I decline the flask the hunter offers with a smile and start to step around him.

He blocks my way and laughs from deep down in the belly, his shoulders shaking like I am the living punch line to the world's most fantastic joke. "How old are you? Twelve? Thirteen?" I can't help but notice that he's wearing snakeskin boots. His cheeks are sunken, like his face is slowly collapsing inwards. You never can tell what's in a person's head by looking at his face. Once, the father of a friend of mine put his hand around my throat. He looked at me and said, I could squeeze your airways closed right now, with one hand. He said, what do you think of that? This was a father. The balding father of my friend.

"Here, let me show you a trick." The hunter slips a hand into a pocket and I don't know what's coming but then, with a flick of the wrist, he fans out a deck of playing cards in his hand. The cards are greasy from having been thumbed through so many times and lined from where they've been bent and smoothed flat again. "Pick a card, any card. Come on, don't you want to see some magic? Just one trick and I'll let you go."

Reluctantly, I pull free the nine of hearts.

"Ok, now slide it back in." I do and watch as he shuffles, letting the cards whirl in his hands like the wings of a captive insect. He makes them dance. They fly through the air in spirals. It's kind of beautiful. Then he slaps them down in his palm so abruptly I jump and he flips up the card that landed on top: it's the good old nine of hearts. A stupid trick, but I smile anyway.

"There's that smile," he says. "So where are you headed so late in such weather?" I shrug.

"Have you ever kissed a boy before, princess?" the hunter asks me then. I see the pink flash of his tongue wetting the corner of his mouth. I did kiss a boy once, a boy with blue hair, but that's not

the sort of thing you tell a stranger. I shake my head, mute, and step off the path to go. He grabs my wrist with one gloved hand. With his other hand he pushes me down into the drifts. The forest is so still, so white. I can see every iced-over twig and every blue shadow. Fabric rips, his ice-laced beard scratches at my cheeks. The snow is cold, his breath is hot. Everything happens so fast.

I stumble through the trees back to the RV while tears freeze to my face. Home, finally, dripping and dirty with leaves in my hair and spots of blood on my clothes, I tell my grandma I met the devil in the woods. She holds my hands in hers and ducks her head to look me over, bringing her face so close her false lashes flutter against my bruised skin. She stares at the finger marks, blue bracelets encircling my wrists. Those milky eyes of hers tremble with water. "No, sweetheart, that was just a man. A friend to the devil, but a man."

The devil must have a lot of friends. I think he and my stepmother might be acquainted. "You better stay out of my way" was the first thing she said to me once she and my father were married. She whispered it into my ear while giving me a hug, squeezing me with her stick arms. My father was hovering nearby.

He always hovered. A pile of photo albums full of me and my embarrassed smile sat on the coffee table in the living room, evidence of his picture-snapping obsession. He said that each day I looked more like my mother and his face would scrunch up in a sad way as he said it.

One day, towering above me in her high heels, my stepmother said, "You know, it's your fault your father is stuck in the past." She had black eyebrows she plucked to near invisibility, and usually I focused on those instead of her eyes, but now I looked at her and she looked at me. "Boarding school," she said. "That's where you belong."

I didn't want to go to boarding school, but that's not why I left. It's not because my stepmother read my diary or because whenever she found me drawing or reading a book, being idle she called it, she put me to work washing her sweaty nylons by hand or cleaning the hairs out of the tubs.

Maybe she was right about it being my fault. I couldn't get that out of my head.

My blouses fly open and my jeans slouch off my hips. Grandma cut the buttons off of all my clothes while I was sleeping and now nothing will fasten.

“What did you do with my buttons, Grandma?”

“Don’t you worry about that. Let me give you a haircut.”

I don’t resist. I fear for my earlobes, but despite her weak eyes, her hands guide the scissors without wavering. Those old hands: wormy with veins and thick with calluses. She sweeps up the clippings and stashes them in a Mason jar. She has a whole closet full of hair in jars. She tells me that she saves all the bits of herself because you can’t just throw yourself away. Who knows where the pieces of you might end up, or in whose hands.

I stay indoors, sometimes taking the spoon from a cup of hot tea and pressing the warm metal against the frosted windows so I can peer out at the frozen woods. The trees are still strung with icicles. The sky is white, clouds ripe with snow. I’m afraid of the woods. I’m afraid to be alone.

Grandma’s very busy in the kitchen, making something with hair and buttons, eggshells and tacks, fur and teeth. Some days it smells like gasoline and some days like cheap perfume. She shoos me away if I get too close.

I find out what it is on my birthday: a new winter coat.

Even with a red ribbon encircling its neck, the coat is ferocious. When I touch it I find it’s warm, almost hot enough to burn my fingertips. My grandma beams, rocking back and forth on her heels. She helps me slip it over my shoulders and pulls the hood over my head, all the way down. Inside it smells like blood and snow. My pulse begins to race. Grandma pulls a chip of mica from her pocket, and as I watch she unfolds it again and again until she’s holding up a full-length mirror. I gaze at myself in the mirror as the seams of the coat knit together into a perfect sheath of fur, a pelt of liquid silver. My new fur bristles, rough as steel wool but gleaming, like handfuls of needles. I drop to all fours and tremble inside this new skin, seeing how my eyes flash. I quiver. I pant. I paw at the carpet, pulling threads loose from the weave. Then I grin at my reflection and my teeth are glinty and sharp.

“The hunter’s out tonight,” Grandma tells me. She laughs. “He’s lost in the forest tonight.”